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On: "The Woods" by Sleater-Kinney Sub Pop Records, May 2005

A close analysis of lyrics only rarely reveals a satisfying level of insight into a rock and roll band. But in the case of Sleater-Kinney's "The Woods", lyrics from the sixth track provide a perfect summary of the thesis of this album. Here, quoted at length, are the most illustrative lines:

*"So you want to be entertained? / Please look away
We're not here 'cause we want to entertain / Please go away (don't go away)
Reality is the new fiction they say / Truth is truer these days / Truth is man-
made / If you're here 'cause you want to be entertained / Please go away
And if your art is done / Johnny get your gun
Join the rank and file / On your TV dial
You come around looking 1984 / You're such a bore, 1984
Nostalgia, you're using it like a whore...
You did nothing new with 1972
Where's the 'fuck you'? / Where's the black and blue? ...
All you want is entertainment / Rip me open it's free ...
1, 2, 3! If you wanna take a shot at me, get in line ...
1, 2, 3! We can drown in mediocrity, it feels sublime / 1, 2, 3! It feels like
someone pushed rewind ...
Don't drag me down, I'm not falling down
The grip of fear is already here / The lines are drawn, whose side are you on?"
-Sleater-Kinney, "Entertain"*

There are a few key pieces of background information that must be considered when pinpointing the exact contextual location (within the ongoing history of rock) and effect of Sleater-Kinney's seventh album. The first is the identity of the band; they were at one time, and will never cease to be, riot grrls. Or anyway that's what we're lead to believe...Riot grrl was one of the most obvious examples of media-homicide in the history of American rock. They are from a movement in the Northwest that ran alongside grunge, the essential difference being gender. Bands like Sleater-Kinney, Bikini Kill, Huggy Bear (in the UK), and Bratmobile played a brand of youthful, largely unskilled punk that was fueled by a historically legitimate feminist rage. Historically

legitimate meaning that their frustration at being excluded from punk rock, in fact all rock-n-roll, was a historical fact that could be proven with evidence similar to that which would prove the existence of racism in professional golf.

The fact that the women of Sleater-Kinney were at one time riot grrls is gratuitously documented and held up as a kind of disclaimer, or handicap, against them. On the other hand, the reasons riot grrl was pushed into existence are virtually unknown. Since the beginning of "hard" rock (that which is meant to be listened to at a high decibel level - usually includes heavily electric guitars and fast, showy drumming), male rock stars and their handlers have created a music culture that at best ignores women, at worst degrades and invites violence unto them. That shaping and creation of hard rock culture took place throughout all of the 1970s and 1980s, and riot grrl was active only for a few brief years in the early 1990s. The reverent, almost pious, canonization of bands like Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, or AC/DC only continues to grow in influence; there is a consistent, uncomplicated and quite socially popular trend of hero worship of the "rock gods" that continues to evidence itself in most modern rock. Conversely, riot grrl has been analyzed to the point of nausea, but it is long, long, dead. (In pop culture terms, of course; ten years isn't *really* such a long time...)

After these considerations, lyrics like "...You're such a bore, 1984 / Nostalgia, you're using it like a whore..." and "...We can drown in mediocrity... [but] it feels like someone pushed rewind..." have a special resonance. Especially when they are enmeshed in a rock album that could be described as one of the cockiest in awhile.

But the most interesting thing about any of this is that *The Woods* is a superb, epic, cumulative, complicated, but above all literate, rock album; it was easily one of the top three of 2005. It sounds like nothing before it, and most listeners think there is something wrong with their speakers upon first listen. There is nothing wrong with the speakers, but perhaps there should be a disclaimer on the CD cover that the album was recorded in an brand-new, intentionally different manner. It sounds fuzzy, like the amps were turned up too loud. At first it's distracting, one wants to clean up the sound and hear it the way we think it is meant to be heard. But we are wrong, and lead guitarist Carrie Brownstein proves this point in spades by the end of the record.